



putting research to work

BRIEF

**RESEARCH
DEVELOPMENT
&
TECHNOLOGY
TRANSFER**

Occupational Driver's Licenses – Do They Work?

Like most states, Wisconsin offers a hardship driver's license to residents with revoked or suspended driver's licenses. Called an "occupational license," it allows qualifying offenders to drive to and from work, to grocery stores, church and other sanctioned destinations.

What's the Problem?

Wisconsin is considered one of the most lenient states in the country at issuing occupational licenses. While the average number of such licenses per state hovers around 8,600, Wisconsin issued nearly 32,000 in 2001, second only to California's 48,000. Furthermore, national statistics suggest states with lenient hardship licensing programs experience higher traffic fatality rates than states with strict programs.

Also, Wisconsin's program permits loose interpretations of appropriate use for the licenses, opening them to abuse by license holders. The program's "homemaker" provisions, for instance, have been used to justify driving to theaters, restaurants and other nonessential destinations.

Officials and citizens have become concerned that the occupational licensing program may subvert license withdrawal measures. The program may return suspended drivers to the road prematurely, thereby diluting the punitive and reformatory benefits of withdrawal and endangering the public.

Research Objectives

This project explores the effectiveness of Wisconsin's occupational licensing program and its impact on highway safety through the following main objectives:

1. Identify practices around the country and Canada via surveys to transportation officials and a literature survey.
2. Compare Wisconsin's program to other programs in terms of privileges offered, fees, requirements and restrictions.
3. Develop a profile of occupational license applicants.
4. Identify and evaluate accident and moving violation incidence among occupational license holders before, during and after the term of the license.
5. Identify how well the current program is understood by the general public and by eligible participants, and evaluate the accessibility of information about the program to eligible participants.

Research Methodology

The consultant worked closely with the project's Technical Oversight Committee in framing the study in these three phases.

- Phase I, Situation Assessment. A quantitative assessment via review of books, articles, and other literature, and a telephone survey of licensing departments in 40 U. S. states and eight Canadian provinces and territories.
- Phase II, Current Perceptions and Profiles. A qualitative inquiry through in-depth interviews with 16 experts on occupational licenses in Wisconsin, including police officers, judges, attorneys, insurance company representatives and others; and a telephone survey of 200 adult Wisconsin residents regarding knowledge of the program.
- Phase III, Occupational Licensee Assessment. Focus groups and mail surveys of occupational license holders and citizens whose licenses had been withdrawn but who were not participants; quantitative inquiries including a mail survey of 407 citizens with withdrawn driver's licenses, and an analysis of WisDOT's database comparing occupational license holders to other drivers.

Investigators
The Dieringer
Research Group, Inc.

**The Wisconsin
Department of
Transportation**

*Occupational
license holders
overwhelmingly
(95 percent) cited
driving to and from
work as a reason
for needing a
permit.*



**“This study
showed us that
Wisconsin’s
occupational
licensing
program is
working pretty
well. But we
need to do a
better job of
defining and
communicating
its purposes.”**

- Mitchell Warren,
program supervisor for
driver compliance in the
Division of Motor
Vehicles

Wisconsin Department
of Transportation
RD&T Program
4802 Sheboygan Ave.
Madison, WI 53707
Nina McLawhorn
Research Administrator
608-266-3199

Evaluating the
Effectiveness of
the Occupational
Licensing
Program

0092-02-10

January 2003

Research Results

The consultant identifies five significant findings.

1. Wisconsin’s occupational license seems to be working. Citations and crashes of participants dropped steeply from the year before obtaining an occupational license to the year in the program. Incidents climbed slightly at the end of the program, but not nearly to the level of the year before. When controlled for age and gender, the incidence rate of former participants matched that of all Wisconsin drivers.
2. Experts who work with the program, participants in the program, and even non-participants strongly support it. Many surveyed or interviewed suggested changes, but these were usually detail-oriented rather than global.
3. The occupational license program is effective in accomplishing the goal of keeping offenders employed while protecting the public from unsafe drivers. The program helps protect the public by reducing offender driving time and leading offenders to have fewer citations and crashes.
4. Experts, offenders and program participants understand the program quite well, though the public does not. Significant confusion surrounds the interpretation of “homemaker” duties, designed to allow grocery shopping and similar household duties requiring vehicular transportation.
5. Wisconsin is more lenient than most states, offering occupational licenses for more types of offenses, imposing lower fees, requiring less of applicants, allowing more activities, and employing shorter waiting periods. However, Wisconsin has more restrictions – including driving times, total driving hours, routes, and destinations. Participants and denied applicants, however, view the program as inflexible, restrictive, and inappropriately punitive, and they rarely identify its public safety purpose.

Implementation

A Technical Oversight Committee weighed this study in concert with a previous WisDOT study (00922-01-08) on safety impacts of license revocation systems, and developed suggestions for implementation that would improve public safety while sustaining Wisconsin’s support of an individual’s desire to provide for self and family. The foremost recommendations include:

- Educate the public, courts, law enforcement, legislature, employers, insurance industry and highway safety specialists on the program by reaffirming its purpose.
- Better define restrictions on occupational licenses, especially “homemaker” functions.
- Make absolute sobriety a mandatory condition of occupational licenses issued for Operating While Intoxicated offenses and like infractions.

Benefits

This detailed study, the first of its kind in the country, reinforces the public safety intent of Wisconsin’s occupational licensing program, and supplies data on how the program is viewed from within and without. Strong involvement by stakeholders in the program and by experts who administer its provisions assure recommendations for program alterations that will sustain the spirit of its legislative intent while refining the letter of its restrictions.

For more information, contact:

Mitchell Warren: mitchell.warren@dot.state.wi.us